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SUBJECT: KOSOVO: INTER-ETHNIC INCIDENTS SPRING UP; ALL SIDES WAITING FOR SIGNS OF NEW BELGRADE GOVERNMENT APPROACH TO KOSOVO

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Tina S. Kaidanow for Reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

¶11. (C) Summary. The formation of a pro-European government coalition in Belgrade has already sparked hope among some in the Kosovo Serb community that things may change for the better. Moderates among the Kosovo Serbs plan to lobby Serbian President Tadic to formulate a policy towards Kosovo which would take better account of the needs of Kosovo Serbs, which includes being allowed to engage with the International Civilian Office (ICO). There are some initial signs that the pressure previously brought to bear on Kosovo Serb moderates may abate and they feel more empowered to act as they wish, including more public contact with the international community. Despite this, interethnic problems in Kosovo -- some sparked by the Serbs, others by Albanians -- remain a challenge to stability, and the absence of UNMIK's overarching executive power (coupled with Serbs' refusal to acknowledge ICO as a legitimate interlocutor) makes it harder to deal with these issues than in the past. In northern Mitrovica, Serbs and Albanians have clashed over a water project, while the construction of a mosque in a mixed village in Kamenica has also caused controversy. The most dangerous recent incident -- the takeover of the municipal building and government by Serb parallel structures in Strpce -- has not become violent, but does pose a challenge to the Kosovo Government. End Summary.

New government, new hope

¶12. (C) After long weeks of negotiation, the formation of a new, pro-European government in Belgrade and the appointment of relative moderate Goran Bogdanovic (DS) to lead the Kosovo Ministry has given some hope to moderate Serbs throughout Kosovo that a more pragmatic and helpful policy will soon be forthcoming from Belgrade. Bishop Teodosije Sibalic and Father Sava Janjic of the Visoki Decani monastery, both of whom are influential moderate figures among Kosovo Serbs, told Charge July 7 that they hoped to see a more constructive Kosovo policy from Serbian President Tadic. Their view -- shared by all but the most hardline Kosovo Serbs -- is that the public anti-independence rhetoric Tadic is compelled to use should be matched by a policy that provides maximum possible benefit to Serbs actually living in Kosovo. Teodosije said he will travel to Belgrade during the week of

July 7, where he hopes to speak directly to Tadic and advocate a more pragmatic policy, in addition to warning of the dangers that partition would pose to Kosovo Serbs south of the Ibar river. (Note: In recent weeks, Kosovo Serbs from the south have been reporting to us and others in the international community that they still fear the Serbian government will eventually propose partition of Kosovo.) Another change Teodosije would like to see from Tadic is an easing of restrictions on contact with the ICO, though he acknowledges that walking back earlier pronouncements from Tadic on the illegitimacy of EU-led institutions in Kosovo will be difficult.

Other small encouraging signs

¶2. (C) There are other noticeable, if small, signs that moderates are feeling more empowered in the new political environment. In the past few weeks, moderate leader Rada Trajkovic from Gracanica has visited the ICO building in Pristina (though without publicity or fanfare) after insisting on lower-profile contacts before the May 11 elections; similarly, Randjel Nojkic (a moderate leader in Gracanica and member of Vuk Draskovic's SPO party) was also willing to increase the profile of his contacts with ICO. Nojkic appeared with ICO officers at a media event July 8 in the Serb village of Caglavica to discuss decentralization. Even more boldly, Gracanica's regional CCK coordinator, Goran Arsic, prevented the parallel Serb authority elected on May 11 from taking control of the municipal building. These steps are tentative but important, and are an indication that -- if given enough breathing room from Belgrade -- moderate

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Kosovo Serb leaders may begin to engage more actively with the international community and the Kosovo Government.

But not all is well....

¶3. (C) Despite the welcome changes that may be blossoming in enclave Serb communities, problems have sprung up, some provoked by Serb action and some engendered by local Albanian intransigence. Perhaps the most troubling issue has emerged in the Serb-majority municipality of Strpce, where on July 2, Mayor Stanko Jakovljevic, a member of Serbian President Boris Tadic's Democratic Party (DS), was pressured to hand over the keys of the municipal building to the parallel government elected in May 11 illegal elections. The parallel "mayor," Zvonko Mihailjovic, is a member of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), the most popular Serbian party in Kosovo among Kosovo Serbs. The move has enraged local Albanians and has attracted the attention of Kosovo's opposition parties and others, who view this as a dangerous encroachment on Kosovo's sovereignty.

¶4. (C) Initial reaction from Kosovo Serb leaders, including Goran Bogdanovic and his probable deputy in the Kosovo Ministry, Oliver Ivanovic (a moderate G-17 member from north Mitrovica), was disappointing. Bogdanovic told us bluntly that he advised Jakovljevic to hand the keys over to prevent a fight among Strpce's Serbs. Ivanovic advocated increased engagement by UNMIK to mediate the problem, which he said must include UNMIK recognition of the May 11 elections. Neither seemed inclined to use their new positions to deal with the matter in a constructive way, although both acknowledged that they would be faced with such thorny issues when they assumed their full responsibilities.

¶5. (C) For the time being, the situation in Strpce is calm, and the new "mayor" has not removed or threatened Albanian municipal workers. Serb KPS officers in Strpce have remained on the job since independence, and on July 3 they confirmed to USKFOR that they would continue to do so. Mihailjovic met a USKFOR team on July 2, asserting that he was the new leader of the municipality, something the team told him was unacceptable. The Embassy and KFOR have also been in close contact with Strpce's Albanian minority, urging restraint.

On July 3, Embassy and ICO officers worked with the government to produce an order signed by PM Thaci extending the UNMIK Executive Decisions (EDs) prolonging the terms of the mayors of Strpce, Zubin Potok, Zvecan, and Leposavic, which were issued in the wake of the Serb boycott of the Nov. 17, 2007 Kosovo elections. The order is designed to provide an official Kosovo government position reaffirming its authority and reminding the parallel governments in Serb-majority areas that they cannot turn to UNMIK or any other actor to legitimize their position.

Mitrovica still a potential flashpoint

¶6. (C) In the ethnically-mixed northern Mitrovica neighborhoods of Three Towers and Suvi Do/Suhadoll, clashes between Serbs and Albanians took place on July 4, with further violence occurring on July 7. The Three Towers incident involved Serb youths throwing stones at an Albanian taxi, while the Suvi Do/Suhadoll incident started when local Serbs protested the construction of a water project through a Serb neighborhood to service an Albanian area. According to UNMIK Police, KFOR, and the Kosovo Police Service (KPS), the clashes involved rock throwing and fistfights, along with reports of gunfire. The July 4 incident in Suvi Do/Suhadoll resulted in a few people sustaining light injuries (including a Serb KPS officer), but the July 7 incident at the same location led to one Serb suffering serious injury. UNMIK and KFOR continue to monitor the situation closely to prevent further outbreaks of violence. Again, heavy doses of pressure from the Embassy has kept the violence from spreading or being used for political purposes by Kosovo's opposition.

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Albanians intransigent in Kamenica

¶7. (C) Another issue has sprung up in the ethnically-mixed village of Berivojce, in the northeastern municipality of Kamenica. Plans to construct a mosque in the village were adopted in October 2007 by the previous municipal assembly at the urging of the former mayor, who ignored a recommendation by the legally-mandated "municipal communities council" that the village's Serb community be consulted before final approval of the proposed site. The site is currently used by the village's Serbs as a playground and gathering spot on holidays. Once donors were found to fund construction of the mosque, work began on June 26. Clashes broke out between Serbs, who had blocked the road adjacent to the mosque in protest, and Albanians, who had gathered for the groundbreaking ceremony. Similar to the incidents in Mitrovica, the clashes involved fistfights and stone throwing.

¶8. (C) On June 30, Poloff, accompanied by an ICO policy officer, visited Kamenica mayor Bagzad Sinani (an Albanian) and deputy mayor Gradimir Mikic (a Serb) to discuss the issue and urge a delay in construction until a compromise solution could be reached. Both agreed, and subsequently generated proposals for a new site, but direct discussions have yet to begin. On the morning of July 8, after telling the Embassy (and Mikic) the previous day that he was still committed to dialogue, the mayor abruptly called us and announced construction would resume. He compared the controversy over the mosque with the ongoing problems in Suvi Do/Suhadoll as examples of Serb misbehavior in Kosovo. At COM's request, PM Thaci, leader of the ruling PDK party (of which Sinani is a member) called Sinani, telling him to delay construction until all parties could agree on the location. Embassy and ICO plan to follow up with mediation and continued discussion between Albanian and Serb interlocutors.

Comment

¶9. (C) It is perhaps not surprising that the months after independence has seen an uptick in the number of inter-ethnic conflicts, as some of the focused restraint demonstrated by

ethnic Albanians around the independence period is now giving way to frustration in the wake of Serb hardline provocations.

The imperative to control these conflicts and prevent any escalation is not lost on Kosovo leaders; they recognize that any perception of Albanian action against the Serb minority would cost them dearly in the international arena and breach their Ahtisaari obligations. Still, in the aftermath of the illicit Serb elections on May 11 and continued provocative behavior from Serb hardliners like the takeover of the municipal building in Strpce, we will find it difficult to suppress Albanian anger and frustration unless some concrete signs of a modified approach emerge from Belgrade soon. Even small actions taken by the new government in Belgrade -- for example tacitly encouraging or simply not preventing Kosovo Serbs from going back to their jobs in the Kosovo Police force or municipal administrations -- would help ease Kosovar fears of continued erosion of their sovereignty. The next few weeks and months will tell if these changes are in the offing or not; we will continue to engage with all sides to encourage moderation, restraint and creative solutions to lingering problems. End comment.

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